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Pina-Cabral, Joao (2017) Comment An Ecumenical Anthropology. American Anthropologist . ISSN 0002-7294.

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.12875>

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COMMENTARY

Comment An Ecumenical Anthropology

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I commend Leticia Cesarino for her brave effort to unpack the complex set of aporias that surrounded Brazil's "cooperation" with Africa under the two previous left-leaning governments. Whatever failings they might have had, we can only lament their passing, as the present situation, formed by the manipulation of judicial institutions by big business in order to overthrow a constitutional government, heralds a much less humanitarian agenda.

Cesarino's empirical starting point is the stark realization that the white middle-class professionals who implemented the cooperative actions that she studied were mostly unresponsive to the rhetorics of "Afro-Brazilian culture." To the contrary, the diplomats who promoted and publicized the cooperation adopted this same rhetoric enthusiastically. I fully agree with her concerning the political uses of the concept of "culture." In particular, we must realize that the notion of "Afro-American culture," as promoted by the likes of Arthur Ramos and Melville Herskovits under the aegis of the United Nations in the 1950s, mediates between two distinct modes of using the concept of culture: a more ethnographic one and a more political one. Once validated by ethnography as a people's "culture," a set of performances and objects can then become a ready instrument for political manipulation, such as the author identifies in Itamaraty's strategic positionings. Brazilian diplomats were, thus, cashing in on the work of previous generations of anthropologists—many of whom, such as Edison Carneiro, Ruth Landes, or Sidney Mintz, undertook truly outstanding research in their day. In this way, the historically registered forms of life of Africans and African Americans become a ready catalogue of performances that can then be used to validate what is claimed to be South-South cooperation in the interests of an international developmentalist apparatus.

But we must ask: Are we really justified in accepting that the humanitarian efforts of the Brazilian government in the early 2000s were an instance of South-South cooperation? In fact, Brazil's role in Angola or Haiti utterly failed to counter the interests of international financial capitalism. Thus, ironically, it had little that was "Southern" and much that was "Northern." I am reminded of Juliana M. Santil's (2006) findings that from the perspective of Angola's political agents, relations with Brazil assumed an ambivalent, almost demonic character. Recent research also suggests that

Brazil's involvement in Haiti also appears quite disturbing from the Haitian angle. Thus, I am prone to agree with the author when she calls Brazil's fetishized relation with other Lusophone countries a "postcolonial kind of Orientalism."

However, the very notion of Orientalism has been suspect from the beginning, particularly when conjoined with a dehistoricized notion of "colonialism," because it naturalizes the concept of the "West," shifting the focus away from the actual military and economic apparatus of imperialism such as it was in force during the second half of the twentieth century. Furthermore, and increasingly, those of us who do not identify with the interests of international financial capital are coming to realize that the old postcolonial binarisms are utterly obsolete, as the beneficiaries of the system that is *presently* oppressing a whole generation of young Africans, Europeans, and North Americans are as likely to be European and North American as Angolan, Saudi, Malaysian, or Chinese. Faced with unbridled capital accumulation and the way it is repressing economic growth and promoting senseless wars around the world, the development apparatus is increasingly revealed as hardly more than an ideological ploy of small concern that mostly serves to feed an intermediary global elite of NGO promoters, many of them anthropologists.

It strikes me that as Cesarino deconstructs some of the problematic aspects of the developmentalist rhetoric, she reproduces others, sometimes by virtue of the very terms that conscribe our discussions. Such is the case with "world anthropologies," which promotes the idea that different "anthropologies" (note the plural) may exist (see Pina-Cabral 2005). Each of these "anthropologies" moves in a different "world." Such a position depends both on a culturalist perspective and on the adoption of the point of view of an encompassing anthropology, which is thus silently granted greater ethical authority over other "anthropologies"—such as those practiced in Brazil. In this way, a notion that at first blush may be ethically appealing (in a multicultural sort of way) turns out to be yet another tool of imperial validation.

A product of this can be seen in the author's naturalized assumption that British anthropology in colonial times somehow ailed from a number of dark lacunae concerning Africa's "pasts, presents, and visions of the future." In actual fact, while there have been bad anthropologists in the past as there are many today, the English-language anthropology that was practiced in southern Africa from the 1920s to the mid-1960s (most of it explicitly antisegregationist)

was on the whole of an empirical and humanitarian standard that has very rarely been equaled since then. The conviction that Africanist anthropology was fundamentally colonialist anthropology is created by our chronocentric proneness to essentialize past actors. As it happens, most competent ethnographers and anthropologists have always been guided by an ecumenical spirit that, today as in the past, is prone to counter the dominant political hegemonies.

Contrary to this, we are living today in a world where anthropology is practiced everywhere and all anthropologists should be entitled to engage all other anthropologists on equal terms wherever they come from, above or below the equator. The dehistoricizing North-South simplification polarizes what was never a clearly divided situation. Therefore, it seems to me increasingly apparent that the very cosmological polarization between the Global North and Global South that is associated with the concept of “world anthropologies” is itself a source of obfuscation. That very same polarization is also what makes it so difficult for us to account for the complexities of Brazil’s promotion of “development” in Africa.

I agree fully with Leticia Cesarino that in order to help clear up the profound misunderstandings that presently characterize relations across the South Atlantic, Brazilian anthropologists must engage more actively in fieldwork on the opposite shore. I have in mind both Africa and Portugal, for there, too, the “colonialism” trope is all too likely to confuse rather than clarify the shifting relations between Portugal and Brazil over the past two centuries. It has become all too

common in our discipline to use “colonialism” as a generalized, yet fully explanatory, abbreviation for a profoundly complex process. The problems with this emerge the moment one attempts to produce responsible, ethnographically informed history (cf. Pina-Cabral 2005).

Ethnography, due to its very nature, is an ethically challenging process. It is the ecumenical potential in the very practice of ethnography—that sense of human proximity that it necessarily fosters—that continues to grant anthropology today an ethical privilege that it already possessed in the “bad old days.” The ecumenical potential within the ethnographic gesture is perhaps the single greatest value of our disciplinary tradition—a value that is not culturally local, not “Western,” not “Northern.” There is no better antidote for the ideological tangles of the day than actual ethnography, as the author so well demonstrates.

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